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ABSTRACT

To broaden the scope of a letter writing unit for seventh graders, a real-life component brought together two groups who could learn from one another, youngsters (who usually did not have living or nearby grandparents) and the elderly in a convalescent home. Students selected their pen pals on the basis of biographical data and similar interests and then wrote their letters of introduction just before Christmas. After the holidays, students wrote a second letter, and the elderly patients answered with letters of their own. During the third week of January, a field trip to the convalescent center was planned so that young and old could meet face to face. Preparations for this visit included viewing several films and studying a mini-unit on the elderly and social attitudes toward them, both in the United States and in other cultures. The visit to the center was kept simple and uncomplicated, and the meetings were poignant and emotionally satisfying. In the spring a get-together was held on the patio of the center, and the final writing assignment was given the week before summer vacation. The rewards of this letter writing project were felt long after school ended in June. (Explanatory material is provided, including handouts for students and questionnaires for students and the elderly patients.) (NKA)

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Letters to Pen Pals at a Convalescent Center

A SCHOOL PROJECT THAT REWARDS WARMTH AND UNDERSTANDING

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Pen Pal Project

I have included a letter writing unit in my seventh grade English curriculum ever since I started teaching in 1967. My prime objective was always to teach students to write technically correct letters. I used to begin by asking each student in the class to write a letter to an imaginary person (either Jane Smith or Bill Smith) who lived at 103 Main Street in Darien, CT. On the back of the page they would draw an outline of an envelope and address it properly. This diagnostic exercise would tell me the general writing ability of the class, and it would serve as a springboard for a lecture/discussion period on the technical aspects of letter writing. Later this first letter would be stapled to a final letter for dramatic proof of each child's growth.

Then using transparencies and an overhead projector, I would guide students through the steps in writing a correct letter. I would show them precisely how to organize their heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. I would do this for business letters as well as for social letters. Also, I introduced grid sheets to help them with the appearance of their letters. Being able to write reasonably neat letters is a morale booster for them.

I used to give my students classroom and homework assignments writing to a wide variety of imaginary audiences. One thing that I would stress to them was that it was important that the writer have a purpose clearly in mind for their letter and that the letter should begin with a statement of its purpose. In addition to indicating clearly their purpose, students were reminded that their friendly letter should sound like them. Their letter would take the place of a visit.

Until I began the pen pal project in 1981, I had always started my letter writing unit in January so that I could help my students write to friends and relatives thanking them for Christmas presents. This was reasonably successful, but I wanted to do more with real-life writing situations. I went to the library and reseached a wide variety of real addresses (e.g., every professional sports team in the U.S., candy and soft drink companies, radio and TV stations, and many associations, societies, federations, and organizations). I would encourage students to write to their favorite teams and speak to their heroes, to ask questions and state their opinions about any areas they felt strongly about, and to ask (politely, of course) for any free materials that were available. They wrote to disc jockeys and program directors in radio and TV and indicated shows that they liked or disliked and why. Sometimes they would try to bring back an already cancelled show.

I also collected from magazines the addresses of movie, TV, and recording stars. Students also wrote their opinions to magazines and newspapers, too. In addition, I obtained the listings for pen pal associations in the U.S. and overseas, and I introduced them to Mort Weisinger's book 1001 Valuable Things You Can Get Free (Bantam Paperbacks).

All of these real-life writing assignments were successful to a degree, but I was never fully satisfied with the involvement of all of my students until I happened to read Erin Alexander's short article (in the March 1981 edition of the English Journal). This article was about a public relations activity that she had just tried. Ms. Alexander's idea was to have students write a Yuletide "friendly letter" to patients in a nearby nursing home. The public relations aspect of this project, although important, was of secondary interest to me. I saw here an opportunity to bring together two groups of people who could learn from one another. Many of the youngsters

I teach either do not have living grandparents or they do not live nearby.

Before I had my students write to the nursing home for the first time, I discussed the project with my principal and he readily approved it. My next step was to contact the director of volunteer activities at the local nursing home. She was very enthusiastic and helpful. She provided me with biographies of all her patients who were willing to be pen pals (and that was the majority of patients there). The biographies included the patients' ages, country of origin, jobs that they held, their hobbies and special interests, their opinions on a variety of topics, and any other information that they wanted to share with the students. Below are several biographies:

DARIEN CONVALESCENT CENTER

Wilfred.....He is very artistic and spends lots of time drawing and painting. His early paintings were landscapes, but now he tends to do geometric designs. In late spring he sets out his vegetable garden and watches the growth with great pride. He has a brother and two sisters.

Mona.....She was born in Great Britain. She enjoys singing and sewing. She lived in Pennsylvania before coming to Darien. She has two daughters and grandchildren who live in Darien and another daughter in Pennsylvania. Mona has a son. He and his family are with the Armed Forces. Mona attends the D.C.C. 60+ Club.

Ada.....She is the sister of Edith (also at the D.C.C.) She was a governess while in England and travelled extensively with the families with whom she was employed, covering Africa and Europe. She moved to Darien to be with her sister and brother. She started painting late in life and also enjoys poetry.

Grace.....She was employed for many years as a switchboard operator for the Norwalk Hospital. Her main pastime was hand embroidery, her specialty being tablecloths. Even now she will sometimes pick one up to work on. She was very active in her church and clubs. Her daughter has constant contact with her through visiting and phone calls. Her son and grandchildren see her throughout the year.

Anna.....She is interested in current events. Her hobbies were sewing and needlework. At the present time she is not very active. Ordinarily, she has been quite active in the programs offered at the Center, and I am sure that she will be up and with it again very soon. She shows a great love for her niece and family and indeed her niece is very loving and loyal to her.

Louis (Lou).....Lou grew up in Mt. Vernon, NY. He often speaks of his younger days at the Convent School. He served in the Navy. Then he trained as an auctioneer in his family's business. He enjoys singing, especially "The Impossible Dream" and is a great socializer. He has had a part in several plays at the Center, and he's a real ham! He also enjoys woodburning and is extremely proud of the finished product.

Pen Pals at the Darien Convalescent Center

Name	Rank	Reason	Name	Rank	Reason
1) Therese B.			24) Margaret O.		
2) Wilfred B.			25) Gertrude Bl.		
3) Mona B.			26) Ingrid B.		
4) Ada B.			27) Ethel D.		
5) Virginia D.			28) Agda J.		
6) Grace G.			29) Martha M.		
7) Anna K.			30) Edith M.		
8) Lou M.			31) Jennie S.		
9) John M.			32) Alice W.		
10) Mary M.			33) Agnes V.		
11) Barbara W.			34) Aaron A.		
12) Bertha D.			35) Fannie B.		
13) Marilyn A.			36) Gertrude Br.		
14) Ethel S.			37) Harriet Br.		
15) John T.			38) Rose D.		
16) Walter S.			39) Herbert V.		
17) Arthur B.			40) Ada L.		
18) Richard A.			41) Loree B.		
19) Kathleen A.			42) Frances C.		
20) Frederick H.			43) James G.		
21) Sophie R.			44) Anna A.		
22) Jean J.			45) Mary B.		
23) Harriet Be.			46) Frances H.		

This is the selection sheet. Students would be asked to select several patients that they would like to write to (and I would make the final selection so that each patient would have a pen pal).

As you can see, on the biographical sheet for the Center, only the

first names of the pen pals are given and the room numbers and telephone numbers are not included. I have done this to protect the patients' privacy, especially at the beginning stage of their correspondence. The information about the residents of the Center was provided to me by the director of volunteers. My students read the biographies and selected their favorite five (without talking to their classmates). They ranked them 1,2,3,4, and 5 (1 being their top choice). If they had an especially good reason why they wanted a particular pen pal (whether due to similar background, interests, hobbies, etc.) my students had the option to indicate that under the column marked "reason". I gave preferential treatment to students with good reasons.

Now turn to the next page in this booklet (page 5)- the student biographies. This is the information that I give to the director of volunteers at the Center. It provides a little background about each of my students so that the Center's residents will feel a bit more comfortable about writing to the students and so that the seniors will have more topics for conversation.

You might be wondering how I know so much about my students. Well, in the first few days of school in September I give a number of questionnaires about them, their family, their interests, and their experiences. Of course, at this time I also test them diagnostically in the areas of reading, spelling, grammar, and composition. Let me show you the two questionnaires that were used to obtain the information that you see on page 5 of this booklet.

First, there was a simple questionnaire:

Student Information

1) Name (as you wish to be called)
2) Homeroom number
3) Address
4) Phone number
5) Names of brothers and sisters
6) Occupation of parents
7) Your favorite TV shows
8) Books you have enjoyed
9) Movies that you have enjoyed
10) Name a geographical location that holds fond memories for you- a place you would like to return to again
11) What you'd like to do in the future as a career

This questionnaire provided me with the names of the students' siblings and their future career preferences.

The second questionnaire (which I call "Experience Portfolio") can be seen on page 6 in this booklet. The Experience Portfolio tells me about the hobbies and interests of my students.

Holidays, especially Christmas, can be a lonely time at a convalescent home. I had my students write their first letter a little over a week before Christmas. The students introduced themselves, told about their plans for Christmas Day and the rest of the vacation, and told about presents they had gotten for friends and relatives. Also, they were encouraged to include photographs and other enclosures.

On page 7 on this booklet, I have included a suggestions sheet. This page is really aimed at the reluctant writer, but it does give information that all students should be reminded about.

STUDENT	FUTURE CAREER PREFERENCE	SIBLINGS	HOBBIES AND INTERESTS
John Crawley	Career in Armed Forces	Mark-9, Bryan -6, Jean-2	Trap & skeet shooting, hunting, traveling, camping, fishing, lacrosse, art, frisbee throwing, electronics
Matt Criscuolo	Doctor	Joe-11, Tina-6	Cooking, bicycles, photography, boating, chemistry, traveling, singing, carpentry, electronics, football, baseball, models, musical instrument
John Erickson	Lawyer or stockbroker	Jill-16, Katie-15	Baseball, football, movie making, video games, fishing, camping, boating, acting, musical instrument, swimming, chess, gerbils and hamsters, gymnastics
Maria Gesualdi	Lawyer or housewife	Angela-20, Louis-18,	Basketball, dogs, snow mobiling, video games, gerbils, softball, acting, swimming, skiing, musical instrument, swimming, ballet
Sarah Hasser	Veterinarian	Chris-14	Helping animals, dogs, cats, photography, embroidery, horses, boating, cooking, traveling, musical instrument, swimming, ballet
Kristen Lombardo	Dance or art teacher	Mark-19, Jeff-17, Michael-8	Tap and jazz (dancing), camping, swimming, skiing, softball, soccer, art work
Daniel Mazabras	Lawyer or doctor	Lynda-20 Jackie-15 Celine-16 AnnaMarie-13	Dog, football, boating, hang gliding, fishing, musical instrument, hunting, camping, swimming, skiing, skating, movie making, baseball
Steve McDonald	Computer Engineer	Rob-20 Nancy-18	Soccer, dirt biking, boating, camping, fishing, rock climbing, hunting, skiing, skating, swimming, skateboards, backgammon
Catherine Muller	Doctor	Walter-13	Rats, mathematics, photography, horses, gymnastics, traveling, diving, musical instrument, judo and karate

Experience Portfolio

Name_____

Read over the following activities, subjects, and experiences. Check the ones that you know a lot about, enjoy doing, or just enjoy talking about.

___ 1) dirt biking
___ 2) photography
___ 3) scuba diving
___ 4) needlepoint
___ 5) embroidery or crewel
___ 6) knitting or crocheting
___ 7) rock collecting
___ 8) horses
___ 9) boating
___10) gymnastics
___11) writing
___12) hang gliding
___13) car engines
___14) chemistry
___15) singing
___16) cooking
___17) traveling
___18) backpacking
___19) canoeing
___20) rock climbing
___21) carpentry
___22) electronics
___23) fishing
___24) pop music
___25) playing a musical instrument - what kind?_____
___26) hunting
___27) camping
___28) stamps
___29) skating
___30) skiing (snow)
___ skiing(water)
___31) coins
___32) bowling
___33) sailing
___34) swimming
___35) skateboards
___36) astrology
___37) acting
___38) softball
___39) chess
___40) diving
___41) gerbils
___42) hamsters
___43) soccer
___44) lacrosse
___45) backgammon
___46) trivia
___47) ballet
___48) art work
___49) video games or pinball machine
___50) snow mobiling
___51) track & field
___52) models - constructing
___53) Modelling (clothes)
___54) judo or karate
___55) Disney World
___56) movie making
___57) frisbee throwing
___58) growing plants
___59) tropical fish
___60) bottle collectin
___61) football
___62) baseball
___63) dog
___64) cat
___65) areas or subject in which I excel that are not on the above list
_____
___66) Something I've done that probably no one else in this class ha ever done.
_____
_____

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A Few Suggestions For Your First Letter

I. Introduce yourself

1) Give your name

2) Tell the names of other members of your immediate family

3) If you wish, you may mention also about aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc.

II. Talk about yourself

1) What you are like

2) What hobbies and interests you have

3) What you do with your spare time

4) Your feelings about school

5) Any school activities that you participate in

6) Any clubs or activities that you are involved in outside of school

III. Talk about your plans for Christmas vacation and the plans that any of your relatives may have for Christmas.

IV. You may include photographs or other enclosures if you want to and if it is appropriate.

V. You may ask them a few questions at the end or toward the the end of your letter. These questions could relate to their hobbies or interests or to some of their past experiences. Be careful not to be too personal or too nosy!

VI. The patient will be writing a return letter to you in January.

After the letters were written, I read each letter and conferred with the student about the proper letter format, proofreading errors, and any possible inappropriate language or remarks.

The next thing that I did was to hand-deliver the letters to the volunteers director, along with a list of the pairs of student-patient pen pals. The following is a portion of a class roster:

Student	Name of Pen Pal	Birthday
1) Audrey Buchs	Ethel Stewart	September 27
2) Ruth Davies	Catherine McLelland	December 6
3) Billy Day	Madeline Peatman	June 17
4) Jack Dowling	Agda Johanson	March 5
5) Glenn Hoffman	Walter Schmidt	February 22

Students were encouraged to write birthday letters to their pen pals, as well as letters on Valentine's Day and Easter. The students were given a small amount of extra credit in English if they showed me these letters just before they mailed them.

Then the director assigned social workers, therapists, and volunteers to take the letters to the patients and get a reply.

As soon as my students returned from their Christmas vacation, I had them write their second letters. This time they described their family's Christmas, the presents they gave and received, and any trips or outings they had. Some students again included photographs. I also hand-delivered the second batch of letters. By this time, the patients generally had developed an interest in their pen pals, and now they would have their chance to write back to the students. Some patients read their letters and wrote their replies without assistance. Many patients, though, needed some degree of help.

Most of the students were able to get replies directly from their pen pals. In some cases, however, patients had passed away or had gone to another hospital for treatment subsequent to the first letter before Christmas. In these cases the director of volunteers wrote the student a letter explaining the circumstances. I found that the students could handle the truth and appreciated the honesty.

During the third week in January, we made a field trip to the convalescent center and the pen pals met face to face. There was great excitement and anticipation among my students. Several days beforehand we had a class discussion about what a convalescent center is and how it differs from a hospital. We talked about the layout of the building and the types of therapy offered ther, and we discussed the kinds of disabilities that are most common at the center. These frank discussions seemed to help dispel any possible anxieties.

In addition, my students viewed three movies:

1) "The Shopping Bag Lady" deals with a girl becoming sensitized to the elderly and their problems.
2) "A Doctor's Story" shows one doctor's special compassion for his elderly patients.
3) "A Piano for Mrs. Cimino" is about a woman who resists her relatives' efforts to put her into a nursing home.

Shortly before our visit to the convalescent center, I taught a mini-unit on the elderly and our attitudes toward them. I began by having the students brainstorm answers to a couple of questions:

1) What are some generalizations that we make about the elderly?
2) What are problems that are unique to the elderly?

There was a wide variety of student reactions. Here is how one English class responded:

Wise	Baldness	Prone to illness	Religious
Wrinkles	Not up to date	Cancer	Generous
White hair	Try to please	Handicapped	Skin is loose
Age spots	Cranky	Hard of hearing	Poverty
Nervous	Impaired speech	Poor vision	Senile
Dentures	Like to sing	Walking	
Talks a lot	Lonely	1) wheel chair	
Talks very little	Talk about the past	2) stooped over	
		3) cane or walker	
		4) immobile (bedridden)	

I gave an anonymous questionnaire that asked the students how they feel when they are around old people (comfortable, ill at ease, frightened, confused how to feel, impatient, condescending). I also asked them what age they considered to be old, how long they expected to live, why they wanted to live until a certain age, and to describe what they would be like and how they would feel at that age.

Then I showed them life expectancy charts for the countries of the world (for men and for women). Many students were surprised by the wide differences from country to country. You can see these statistics on page 10 in this booklet. On page 11 are the statistics for life expectations in the U.S.

We also discussed attitudes toward the elderly in other cultures and countries. We discussed what it is like having three generations living in the same household. What are the advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of each of the three generations. We talked about stereotyping of the elderly and how this is influenced by books, movies, and advertising. Students are given an assignment to find examples of stereotyping of the elderly in books, TV shows, or advertising. We also looked at examples of positive roles of the elderly in books, movies, and TV shows which have important older characters. We did the same with advertising on TV, radio, and in magazines. We talked about what is attractive about these people. I asked my students which of those qualities they would like to have when they become elderly, and what are unique obstacles faced by these older people.

The students used their dictionaries to define the following terms: geriatrics, senility, ageism, and Alzheimer's disease. We also did a little research project on great contributions that have been made to our society (or in any other country at any time during the history of mankind) by elderly artists, writers, politicians, historians, humanitarians, philosophers, etc. The students had to write the person's name, the age that they were still active (often the year that they died), and a description of their contribution to the world. My students found hundreds of such persons. Here are just a few (minus their contribution description): P.T. Barnum (81), Jack Benny (80), Pabblo Casals (98), Winston Churchill (91), Charles DeGaulle (80), Thomas Edison (84), Henry Ford (84) Ben Franklin (84), Sigmund Freud (82), Oliver Wendell Holmes (94), Grandma Moses (101), etc.

Life Expectancy from Birth in Major Countries of the World

		Men	Women			Men	Women
1)	Algeria	52.9	55.0	39)	Iran	57.6	57.4
2)	Argentina	65.1	71.3	40)	Iraq	51.2	54.3
3)	Australia	69.9	76.8	41)	Ireland	68.7	73.5
4)	Austria	68.1	75.1	42)	Israel	71.9	75.6
5)	Bangladesh	45.8	46.6	43)	Italy	67.0	73.1
6)	Belgium	68.6	75.1	44)	Japan	73.4	78.9
7)	Bhutan (India)	42.0	40.5	45)	Lebanon	61.4	65.1
8)	Bolivia	46.5	51.1	46)	Mexico	62.7	66.5
9)	Brazil	57.6	61.1	47)	Netherlands	71.9	78.5
10)	Bulgaria	68.6	73.9	48)	New Zealand	69.0	75.5
11)	Canada	69.0	76.0	49)	Nicaragua	51.2	54.6
12)	Ctl. African Rp.	33.0	36.0	50)	Norway	72.3	78.7
13)	Chad	29.0	35.0	51)	Pakistan	51.9	51.7
14)	Chile	59.5	65.7	52)	Panama	64.2	67.5
15)	China	68.0	68.0	53)	Paraguay	60.3	63.6
16)	Columbia	65.0	70.0	54)	Peru	55.1	58.0
17)	Costa Rico	66.2	70.4	55)	Phillippines	56.9	60.0
18)	Cuba	68.5	71.8	56)	Poland	66.9	74.5
19)	Czechoslovakia	67.0	74.1	57)	Portugal	65.2	72.0
20)	Denmark	71.3	77.4	58)	Romania	67.4	72.1
21)	Ecudor	54.8	57.0	59)	Saudi Arabia	44.2	46.5
22)	Egypt	53.6	56.1	60)	Singapore	65.1	70.0
23)	El Salvador	56.7	59.7	61)	South Africa	56.6	59.4
24)	Ethiopia	37.0	40.1	62)	Spain	70.4	76.2
25)	Finland	68.5	77.1	63)	Sweden	72.5	78.7
26)	France	69.9	78.0	64)	Switzerland	71.8	76.2
27)	Gabon (Africa)	25.0	45.0	65)	Syria	54.4	58.7
28)	East Germany	68.8	74.7	66)	Thailand	57.6	63.0
29)	West Germany	69.0	75.6	67)	Togo (Africa)	31.6	38.5
30)	Great Britain	69.8	75.9	68)	Trinidad & Tobogo	64.0	68.0
31)	Greece	72.0	75.0	69)	Tunisia	54.0	56.0
32)	Guatemala	48.2	49.7	70)	Turkey	53.7	53.7
33)	Haiti	47.1	50.0	71)	U.S.S.R.	64.0	74.0
34)	Honduras	52.4	55.9	72)	Uruguay	66.3	72.8
35)	Hungary	66.7	73.6	73)	Venezuela	65.0	69.7
36)	Iceland	73.4	79.3	74)	Vietnam	43.2	46.0
37)	India	47.1	45.6	75)	Yugoslavia	67.6	72.6
38)	Indonesia	47.5	47.5				

United States Years of Life Expected at Birth

Year	Total Population	Male	Female
1980	73.8	70.0	77.7
1979	73.8	69.9	77.8
1975	72.5	68.7	76.5
1970	70.8	67.1	74.7
1965	70.2	66.8	73.8
1960	69.7	66.6	73.1
1950	68.2	65.6	71.1
1940	62.9	60.8	65.2
1930	59.7	58.1	61.6
1920	54.1	53.6	54.6
1910	50.0	48.4	51.8
1900	47.3	46.3	48.3

M15-68

I gave my students a chance to express their ideas in a short essay agreeing or disagreeing with the following statement: "Old people are the survivors; they're the strongest and the bravest".

Finally, my students read a book called Grandpa- And Me by Stephanie S. Tobin. This novel deals with the problem of Grandpa's growing senility and how it affected the family.

Getting back to my students' trip to the convalescent center, I actually take two field trips. Half of my students go on one day and the other half go the next day. The convalescent center is not really equipped to accomodate more than about 45 visiting students at a time. I take at least one other adult with me. I try to have another teacher and a parent volunteer. Hopefully, one of them also can take a few photographs.

The field trip began with a tour of the center. Then it was time for the students to meet their pen pals. As we passed by a room or saw a resident pen pal, the pairs were introduced. The meetings were very poignant, sometimes with both patient and student crying for joy. Some students brought their pen pal a small gift (candies, flowers, etc.) Nothing elaborate was allowed. At the end of our visit, the director of volunteers provided us with refreshments and a chance to ask questions about anything that was on our minds. The director and other staff members of the center gave a brief talk about career opportunities available at a convalescent center (e.g., physicians, dieticians, physical therapists, social workers, psychiatrists, religious counselors, recreational counselors, nurses, nurses aides, orderlies, consultants, office workers, business administrators) and how students could become volunteer workers.

After our visit many students continued to correspond (and sometimes visit) their pen pals. A number of my students became volunteers at the center.

In the spring there was a get together for the pen pals on the patio outside the convalescent center. This took place immediately after school and lasted for a little over an hour. Students who lived near the center took their regular busses home and then walked or rode their bicycles over. Several parent volunteers driving station wagons helped me transport the rest of the students. The refreshments (cookies, cakes, fruits, dips, and fruit drinks) were provided by the students this time. This was a voluntary activity, yet it was well attended.

The final letter writing assignment was given the week before summer vacation. I asked my students to bring their pen pals up to date on events that had transpired since they had last spoken or written to them and let their pen pals know about their plans for the summer.

There are a few other activities that some of my students did for a small amount of extra credit. First of all, my students were encouraged to visit the center (which is only about two miles from our school) whenever they can. There are always things that they can do there: reading to the patients, singing or playing a musical instrument, playing board games (card games, electronic games, etc.), helping with arts and crafts projects, bringing food trays to patients' rooms, bringing their records or cassette tapes to play, and many other activities (including just coming to talk or watch TV with the patients). Whenever my students visit the center, they sign in on a log book that I have there. At the end of each month I display on a bulletin board in my classroom the names of students who did volunteer work that month at the center.

Also, each month I organize a special activity at the center. Sometimes it is a musical activity (e.g., one of the instrumental or vocal

groups from our school). Other times we have a bingo get together or a party. Probably the most popular event that we have done is the talent show. The talents have included singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, magic acts, stand-up comedians, comedy sketches, mimes, and poetry reading. The performers include both students and their senior pen pals. The show is videotaped so that we can enjoy again and again. We also make a duplicate copy of the tape to give to the center.

Another extra credit assignment that a few of my students did can be seen on page 14 on this booklet. This project involved a student with recording reminiscences, poems, or other types of writing of patients.

One last activity that some of my students did was to write letters for patients who were physically unable to do it themselves. These letters were usually to the patient's friends and relatives, but they could even be for business purposes. The post office has an arrangement called "Project Scribe" in which they provide the convalescent center with free envelopes if they are used by volunteers to help patients with writing letters.

At the end of the school year I had my students anonymously fill out a questionnaire about the pen pal program so that I could determine its strengths and weaknesses and make it even better the next school year. You can see a copy of this questionnaire on page 15 of this booklet.

In summary:

Looking back at how I have taught letter writing over the years, I much prefer the genuineness and warmth that I found in my students' letters to the convalescent center to the self-serving half-truths contained in letters designed to obtain free merchandise from companies, sports teams, and celebrities. Also, as I personally became involved with the convalescent center, I saw how little direct contact the patients had with young people and how their spirits were raised by getting to know my students. The letter writing project is something that my students and I have enjoyed from December through June, and we continue to feel its rewards long after that.

If you have any questions or comments, I would like to hear from you. Also, I'd like to hear from any people who try this pen pal project.

Additional copies of this booklet may be obtained by sending your name and address and $1.00 to:

Peter M. Ashe
Middlesex Middle School
204 Hollow Tree Ridge Road
Darien, CT 06820

Special Letter Writing Project (Extra Credit)

Reminiscences, poems, and other types of writing

Older people have a wealth of stories to tell, feelings to express, and ideas to communicate. They may just need an interested and encouraging audience. The senior citizens may tell or write their own real or fictional stories. The student will taperecord or help the person to write down their story. The student will share the story (or poem) with their English class. If it seems apprpriate, the stories can reach a wider audience through the Middlesex M.S. literary magazine and/or the town newspaper. Copies of the story (or stories) will be given to each older person who participates. Also, a booklet will be made of all of the stories and will be given to the Darien Convalescent Center.

I Reminiscences

1) Where were you born?
2) What town did you grow up in?
3) What kind of house was it?
4) What was school like when you attended it?
5) What were some of your favorite pranks when you were a child?
6) What do you remember most about your childhood?
7) What were some milestones in your life?
8) Were you ever in a dangerous situation (e.g., a fire, flood, bad snow storm)?
9) What was it like during the Great Depression?
10) How did the stock market crash of 1929 affect you and your family?
11) The end of World War II- Where were you when you heard that the war was over? How did you feel then?
12) What was your reaction to various well-known historical events (e.g., the assassination of President Kennedy)?

Some Suggestions

Always read back to the patients what they have said ("Here is what you've written so far"). Then you can ask "What do you want to say next?" Record everything that they say, even if they don't think that it is important. Always encourage them.

II Poetry

1) Write a poem about the quietest things or the quietest times you can think of. If you like, put a different quiet thing in each line.
2) Think of your favorite color or one that you like a lot, and write about what it makes you think of. If possible, make te whole poem about one color. Think of everything that you can that has that color. If you like, you may bring in other colors, too.
3) Write a poem which is entirely about things that you never told anyone. A poem of secrets. A good idea might be to start every line or every other line with "I never told anybody..." These secrets don't have to be important ones.
4) Comparisons. Begin with something you are interested in and say what it is like. What is it like in your feelings? Compare it to something else.
5) Write about the seasons of the year, the stars, the moon, flowers, trees, etc.

QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT MR. ASHE'S PEN PAL PROGRAM

DO NOT SIGN YOUR NAME

1) In general, how would you rate the program? (Circle one)

Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

	(Circle one)	
2) Do you see value in the program:		
a) For yourself?	YES	NO
b) For others?	YES	NO
3) Were you aware of any change in your own attitudes?	YES	NO
4) Would you wish to participate in this or a similar program again?	YES	NO
5) I enjoyed writing to elderly people.	YES	NO
6) I found the Darien Convalescent Center an interesting place to visit.	YES	NO
7) I liked my pen pal.	YES	NO
8) I liked a lot of patients at the D.C.C.	YES	NO
9) I think that the patients appreciated my visits.	YES	NO
10) I visited the D.C.C. more than just on the January field trip.	YES	NO
11) I enjoyed the movie "The Shopping Bag Lady".	YES	NO
12) I enjoyed the movie "A Doctor's Story".	YES	NO
13) I think that the classroom discussions about the D.C.C. (in January) prepared me for what I saw at the D.C.C.	YES	NO

14) If you did not feel prepared for your first visit, explain why and what else did you need to know?

15) I enjoyed the bingo get-togethers.	YES	NO	DIDN'T ATTEND
16) I enjoyed the end-of-year party at the D.C.C.	YES	NO	DIDN'T ATTEND

17) What are some other activities that you think should be added to the pen pal program?_____

18) What are some ways that the pen pal program could be improved?_____

19) Any other comments or suggestions?_____

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